



DRIVING SNOW

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Despite Challenges, Backcountry, Snowshoe and Nordic Markets Continue to Thrive.

VOICES OF THE BRANDS))

By Lou Dzierzak

Outdoor enthusiasts are passionate about their winter pursuits. But obstacles like low snowfalls leading to late ski resort openings, increased cost of lift tickets and concerns about avalanche fatalities can temper that enthusiasm.

As the 2014-2015 winter season unfolds, the Snowsports Industry Association reports that the snow sports retail market reached \$699M in snow sports equipment, apparel and accessories sales from August 1 to October 31, 2014. Compared to a year earlier all equipment and equipment accessories sales were down eight percent to \$213M.

Despite these issues backcountry skiing, snowshoeing and cross country skiing continue to thrive. Outdoor Insight offers the perspectives of key brands in each segment.

BACKCOUNTRY MARKET

Sam Cook, Tecnica Group USA

“The overall ski market is stable. The general consumer participation rates remain steady, which is a key health indicator of the category. How consumers spend time on the mountain is changing.”

Samantha Killgore, SCARPA North America.

“The backcountry market is growing, and it’s growing rapidly. Skiers are starting to venture into the backcountry by leaving from gates in the ski area. There’s a certain romance to the idea of skiing untouched lines outside of the reach of the masses inside the resort. Modern media is also helping to fuel that - with a whole slew of videos and photos of both professional athletes and our friends doing exciting things in the backcountry, it helps to reinforce the excitement to get out there. There is also an element of growth in backcountry thanks to a swell of excitement in uphill skiing and uphill fitness. With ski resorts allowing people to start skinning in resorts, it’s making the idea of skiing in the backcountry much more accessible.”

Gord Bailey, G3

“What is very interesting is the level of commitment that skiers and riders are giving to a fairly athletic type of recreation. That passion is breeding a new culture of activity that is part adrenaline and part ‘zen’. The commercial side of the market is enjoying revenue growth partly because of the sheer numbers of new participants, but also because of the quality level of the goods needed to really enjoy the sport of touring.”

PRODUCT EVOLUTION

Sam Cook, Tecnica Group USA

“In general, products are made today with better quality materials and are more technology rich in features, yet often available at the same retail price as 10 years ago. Over the past 5 years, ski boots from a range of manufacturers are lighter, better fitting, better performing and much more customizable. And the consumer has a better experience all for the same price. The same holds true in skis, where we have seen the total weight of the product lighten substantially, yet the ski still performs at a very high level and is often easier to enjoy without sacrificing performance.”

Samantha Killgore, SCARPA North America.

“SCARPA is a brand that is very much driven by innovation and we just finished a very successful consumer launch of a highly innovative boot that we received numerous awards for. That kind of innovation in the ski industry helps drive other innovation by competing brands. It’s almost cyclical. Now with the ball in motion, there stands to be a whole slew of new ideas founded in that one minor tweak that we made with how we could design a backcountry boot. For SCARPA, we always keep an eye on what will make skiing more enjoyable and available to consumers. Our product innovation comes from that very focus.”

Gord Bailey, G3.

“We have lightweight skis with carbon technology and our ION AT binding has evolved into a family of three models. The G3 ION binding now offers RV’s as low as 4 and up to 12, including a new lightweight model, the ION LT12 for those who want to tour with the simplicity of a brakeless binding. G3’s climbing skins have also had a big update with lighter, more supple materials and greater length adjustability to fit a broader range of skis and boards. And the new G3 Splitboard connection system and trimming profile is the first climbing skin to really mate with the asymmetrical dimensions of each half of a splitboard.”

Greg Wozer, LEKI USA, Inc.

“There is a market need to pace ourselves for the sake of production cycles and pipe line inventory, however we are anxious to introduce innovation when ready and when it makes sense. LEKI is fortunate to be a market player with high-end technical poles in multiple winter and summer sports. This gives us unique perspective into product development that allows one market category to benefit another. While some years our trekking poles have benefitted from features we developed for ski, our 2015/16 ski pole line will be benefitting from new technology developed for trekking and adventure racing.”

SNOWSHOE MARKET

THE STATE OF THE SNOWSHOE MARKET

Chris Barchet, MSR winter and water products.

“The numbers show that the snowshoe market is relatively flat with respect to participants and dollars over the last year. Even though the industry growth is flat, MSR continues to bring participants to our brand because of our unique traction-based technology. Traction is important for anyone who snowshoes because stable feet means you expend less energy and are safer in challenging conditions. Alpinists and Mountaineers understand this. We are constantly working to get the message out to anyone who wants to walk in the snow.”

Jeff Oster, Atlas

“The global snowshoe market is growing at a healthy rate. The Atlas brand continues to grow with the market. We are continuing to pursue markets that have been a part of the snowshoe story for a long time. We are catering to the utilitarian demographic using snowshoes for snowmobiling, search and rescue and other winter professions. More specifically, we are providing snowshoes to the recreational customer for snowboarding, hiking, running and friendly outings on the trail.”

Kelsey Boyce, Tubbs Snowshoes

“The snowshoe market is healthy and growing. According to the latest SIA data, the snowshoe market grew by 15 percent year over year. Snowshoeing is growing as an activity due to its attractiveness to new participants. People with active lifestyles are looking for more activities to participate in, and snowshoeing is a great option to get outside in the winter months. Another key to its attractiveness is the sport’s affordability compared to other winter sports.”

THE EQUIPMENT UPGRADE CYCLE

Kelsey Boyce, Tubbs Snowshoes

“While snowshoeing technology has advanced greatly in the last decade, many users don’t regularly update their equipment due to the lifecycle of their current equipment. Tubbs Snowshoes last for well over a decade.”

Jeff Oster, Atlas

“Snowshoes are engineered to last for years. The strength and durability of construction leads to the low turnover rate in a pair of snowshoes. For that purpose, we anticipate customers to change or upgrade their snowshoes every 5-15 years.”

Chris Barchet, MSR winter and water products.

“People view snowshoes as a non-technical product but the designs are actually very performance driven. People tend to think their old snowshoes are good enough because they are not broken, but they would have a much better experience with a newer pair of snowshoes. Anyone with shoes older than five years will see a dramatic difference in performance. This is due to materials, design, and binding technology, which have improved greatly over the years. The changes in design and materials have helped improve performance of our snowshoes—akin to shaped skis and rocker technology helping move ski industry forward.”



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SPECIALTY RETAIL RELATIONSHIPS

Jake Thamm, Crescent Moon

“Retailers are often reluctant to order early, then they want product tomorrow when the deep snow arrives. Making snowshoes in the United States is a bit of an advantage dealing with the vacillations of ordering and the craziness of retailers. It allows us to be more responsive to retailers. Some of the risk is passed on to us and retailers don’t get the pre-season discounts and are willing to pay to fill the order.”

Chris Barchet, MSR winter and water products.

“The MSR brand is ranked as one of the highest quality brands in the outdoor industry. Our snowshoes have the highest average sell-through and highest average retail price. Specialty retailers know that carrying our snowshoes helps them hedge against potential losses in a low snow year.”

Jeff Oster, Atlas

“Specialty programs such as early buy deadlines and other incentives allow lower pricing for specialty dealers in the industry. Atlas also sends Authorized Dealer Kits to dealers carrying our product in an effort to educate the retail store representatives and drive brand enthusiasm.”

Jake Thamm, Crescent Moon

“Crescent Moon has launched a customization program. A customer can go to our website and build their own snowshoe by selecting frame, color, traction system and binding. The process gives us a one on one relationship that is valuable and totally unique. We’re offering something they can’t get anywhere else in the market. Now we’re working to determine how to make it work for our retailers.”

PRODUCT EVOLUTION

Jeff Oster, Atlas

“Our brand perception is driven in large part by our product innovation. Atlas snowshoes continue to evolve as we seek the best way to cater to our target audience. New frame designs such as the Hybrid construction of the Atlas Endeavor introduced in 2014 and lighter suspension systems such as LRS also introduced in 2014 are ways that the Atlas model line continues to evolve.”

Chris Barchet, MSR winter and water products.

“MSR does not change products for the sake of change. We introduce product when there is a real need or when technology becomes available that really changes performance.”

Kelsey Boyce, Tubbs Snowshoes

“While there hasn’t been game-changing innovation as large as the introduction of the composite snowshoe line, the FLEX Series, in the past five years, we believe the introduction of a Tubbs quality binding with integrated Boa bindings was a huge step toward user-centered design.”

Jake Thamm, Crescent Moon

“The pace of innovation seems to come in fits and starts. I’m not sure the snowshoe market is driven by innovation. I think it’s more of a brand building process.”

We want to make a better product every year. That’s an important part of establishing our brand and helps us earn new business with retailers. Some brands snowshoe small piece of larger corporate structure. It’s how we make our living so it’s a different focus.”

CROSS COUNTRY SKIING

THE STATE OF THE CROSS COUNTRY SKI MARKET

Chris McCullough, K2 Sports

“There is a core market that is insanely passionate and healthy. Across the board the market is growing. There has been some wonderful momentum coming out of high visibility events like the Winter Olympics where the general public gets to see what the sport is all about on the main stage and carry that momentum into the next year’s selling cycle. Cautious optimism is still an applicable term to describe the market.”

Isaac Wilson, Salomon and Atomic, Amer Sports

“The market is volatile and extremely snow dependent. Right now the market is up over 50 percent over the last two years, but with no snow it can decrease just as quickly. Participation and sales are really strong when Mother Nature cooperates.”

THE EQUIPMENT UPGRADE CYCLE

Chris McCullough, K2 Sports

“The core Nordic market does want different skis for different conditions and disciplines. We can confidently say if a skier switches to Madshus they are not just going to change one pair of skis.

We strive to have healthy relationships with key specialty retailers across the country. Bring approachable, high-end race product to market in a way that will entice people to convert their entire quiver.”

Isaac Wilson, Salomon and Atomic, Amer Sports

“Our performance market has been growing to stable over the last few years. These are our most important customers because they find snow. Even in bad years they are looking for the opportunity to ski. And, this customer is always upgrading. The touring customer will upgrade over a 4-5 year cycle, and this year with the early start to winter in key markets we saw a lot of upgrading.”

PRODUCT EVOLUTION

Isaac Wilson, Salomon and Atomic, Amer Sports

“We are driving very hard with carbon technology in the ski, boot, pole and binding categories at the vector level. We have made some real advances in Nordic boot technology, full carbon ski and binding technology as well as bringing high tech carbon to better price points in poles. Touring and backcountry product are slow to evolve because the dealers in this category need it to have a longer cycle for that customer. We want to bring innovation to the customers that value it most.” ●



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Socks, Evolved

VOICES OF THE BRANDS)))

At one time, socks were purchased in convenient 3-packs. Options were limited to heather brown, grey or black, heavyweight or lightweight. Today, outdoor enthusiasts spend as much time evaluating their sock selection as they do other pieces of technical equipment. Application specific models, tailored cushioning zones and natural or synthetic fiber options allow consumers to find a sock that works for their personal interests and preferences.

Vendors Weigh in on the Sock Market.

Key Style Trends

Kelly Nester, Nester Hosiery

“Consumers are definitely more targeted in their selections and end use is definitely a better way to segment each product.”

Tanya Pictor, Balega

“Lighter, finer and brighter are the trends for 15/16 with Balega. Color remains a strong driving interest with consumers and retailers. Balega has taken great steps this year to add lots of fresh, bright color combinations to ensure that Balega stands out from the crowd with bold uses of color, whilst retaining technical integrity of all our products. In

addition, lighter weight and ergonomic fitting socks continue to be important.”

Bruce Barrows, Lorpen

“Styles are driven by season. In the colder weather we get a lot of visits to our site about our Polartec socks. They are unique in that they are a sewn sock, not a stitched or knitted construction and offer a different set of performance attributes. We see a number of consumers researching those models.”

Jeff Bull, fitsok

“We currently see two drivers at Fitsok. First, our ISW Wool Trail Sock we revamped and released in 2014 has really

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gained a following during the holidays, and we continue to see retailers asking for new colors on current styles.”

Ric Cabot, Cabot Hosiery Mills / Darn Tough

“We are seeing growth in the lighter, faster, stronger approach to building socks. We are seeing new people enter the hiking market who aren’t wearing the traditional heavyweight boots. They are using trail running shoes to hike so we are seeing a lot of interest in light cushioning styles.

We are also seeing people moving away from traditional white and more into color and graphic interest in the design.”

Consumers Know Their Stuff

Kelly Nester, Nester Hosiery

“I strongly believe that consumers are spending more time researching products. There’s more information available every day and consumers are checking out ratings and consumer reviews. They are also looking deeper into supply chain and production processes. People are researching

brands and products and then making a much more educated purchase decision.

We strive every day to make sure we are describing our products in a clear, concise way. It’s so important and there’s always more to tell.”

Tanya Pictor, Balega

“I think consumers do [research] on higher dollar branded items. On socks however, a lot of the information still comes from the in store experience where sales associates play a big role in educating consumers about the different benefits various sock brands offer.

We aim to build a brand where the consumer has immediate awareness and recall on our product. This entails on-line information as well as continually updating our retail partners with information on our products, their functionality and the benefit’s that wearing Balega’s may bring to the active consumer. We produce visually appealing product to entice consumers at the point of sale and package it in attractive informative packaging with succinct, almost like a silent



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salesmen, but underlying everything we do at Balega, is the functionality and performance of our products.”

Ric Cabot, Cabot Hosiery Mills / Darn Tough

“We get a lot of very particular questions from customers about styles and the differences between styles. People want different models for different footwear. Customers will tell us the specific footwear brand, style of boot and temperature range they will encounter and asking for recommendations. We are tailoring our website presentation and customer service training to what topics people are interested in.”

Socks Get Super Techy

Bruce Barrows, Lorpen

“The consumer is very interested in technology and what that will do to help them become warmer, more comfortable, or create a perception of increased performance.

Younger people have been buying non-traditional sock fibers for some time. They have been purchasing technology fibers that Nike or Adidas have introduced.

When they start shopping they are looking for the technological advantages that will help them stay warmer or perform better. We get a lot of questions about what will this fiber do, how will this product help me perform better.

I find it interesting that the consumer seems to be more progressive in their purchasing inquires and questions about technology than the retailer is in many cases.”

Jeff Bull, fitsok

“Fitsok has worked hard to tweak and improve the engineering around our socks. Customers are more educated than ever on small details like toe seams, arch support and fiber content. Returning to merino wool for the ISW model has proved to be a great decision for Fitsok.”

Carving Out Space at Retail

Kelly Nester, Nester Hosiery

“We’re the new kid on the block but we’ve seen strong sell-through with our retail partners. We’re maintaining our shelf space and we’re excited about 2015 and 2016.”

Bruce Barrows, Lorpen

“It’s challenging no question. The story we continually use to express the benefits of Lorpen is that our technology is different from almost everyone else out there. There will be millions of pairs of merino socks sold in the outdoor performance market. At the same time there are consumers looking for new technologies. Our company is based on blended yarn technologies. If you want something that is performance driven our company is focused on combining yarns to make what we believe is a more performance-enhanced product.

Once you fill your merino needs, we believe we are an alternative and provide a better performance, durability and comfort story. We are constantly looking at different blends of yarns to find something to meet our vision of what a good performing sock should be. Add thermo-cool. There are some things coming in the future that are pretty exciting.”

Tanya Pictor, Balega

“We are delivering a product of unsurpassed quality that performs at its peak every time. In addition Balega offers so much more, from really attractive retail margins by comparison to some of our competitors, our philosophy regarding community involvement and sales support.”

Ric Cabot, Cabot Hosiery Mills / Darn Tough

“Just because there are a lot of players, doesn’t necessarily

USA Sock Makers Get Creative to Fuel Resurgence.

TODAY’S MAKE LOCAL movement is bringing renewed vigor to the long-standing domestic industry of sock making. Established brands are re-emphasizing their roots via creative product development and heritage-rich branding efforts, while start-ups offer a fresh take on locally sourced goods and online marketing. Together sock businesses from the southeast to the upper Midwest are taking “American Made” to the next level in the year ahead.

Branding efforts increasingly highlight true-blue Americana qualities. For example, Philadelphia-based brand United by Blue executes blends heritage with high tech in a new line of bison down socks. The

brand was already producing a merino wool sock, but according to company founder Brian Linton, “the feeling was

At the end the day, however, socks must fit, feel good, function properly and rely on innovative product development.

‘what more could we do’ in terms of technical benefits, commercial viability and a domestic focus.”

The company considered a variety of livestock, “but none had the affinity to USA as Bison does,” explained

Linton who pointed out that bison population is now near 500,000 and they are no longer an endangered or threatened species. He also stressed that using bison down and creating a transparent USA supply chain was consistent with United by Blue’s sustainability priorities.

The new Ultimate American Sock is a merino/bison/nylon/spandex blend created along a supply chain that includes ranchers out west, yarn spinners in the east, and a sock knitter in the Midwest. The socks come packaged in a box made in Wisconsin. The story of the sock and its journey through America is an integral part of the package’s design, according to the company.

Veteran hosiery mills are

also upping their game with sophisticated product and amplified marketing. As an example, for its 110th anniversary, Wigwam is planning a four-month initiative to promote the company and its Made in the USA story. According to Jim Einhauser, Wigwam EVP of sales and marketing, “We have also begun utilizing a new package format for a selection of our line that promotes Made in the USA and our heritage. The seal on the package originated from the Wigwam archives in the 1930s and has been incredibly well received by retailers and the marketplace.”

He continued, “There is no doubt that Made in the USA has always been a strong



make the market competitive. There are a lot of players, but there are just a handful where the competition really happens. Within those players, that's what drives innovation and the market forward. We grew 62 percent last year and anticipate similar growth this year."

Consumer Brand Loyalty

Kelly Nester, Nester Hosiery

"Folks continue to become more brand loyal and you can maintain that loyalty until you do something to lose them or another product comes along that is superior in a way that is important to them. With socks, people also tend to be style loyal. They find something they like and return to buy 12 pairs."

Bruce Barrows, Lorpen

"I don't believe there is much consumer loyalty. It is much easier to build loyalty with a consumer than it is with a retailer. That's one of the issues with brick-and-mortar stores."

Jeff Bull, fitsok

"Both retailers and consumers have expressed a lot of loyalty, and we'd attribute a large part of our growth to that."

Tanya Pictor, Balega

"In certain categories [there is loyalty], and with small ticket items you see it to a lesser extent, but yes it is wonderful to see fierce brand loyalty in a predominantly commodity world. We are blessed that Balega has a strong support base. It makes us feel that in some small way, we are making a difference to our customers lives."

Ric Cabot, Cabot Hosiery Mills / Darn Tough

"We've grown over 60 percent each year over the last three years, so I think that talks to our customer's loyalty. We've created a brand that customers can wrap their arms around and embrace." ●

mantra for Wigwam and I believe that a resurgence of interest in domestically made goods is gaining traction among retailer and consumer alike. In the past year, 'Made in the USA' awareness has risen, especially with the increase national coverage. Wigwam receives requests every week from consumers and retailers alike that want to buy into 'USA Made' and tell the story."

Nester's in-house brand Farm to Feet is also resonating in the marketplace. In it's packaging and trade shows booths, for example, the brand shares the stories of people who are invested in every step of the supply chain from shearing sheep to folding socks. Compelling black and white images of the individuals give the end product added credibility.

Darn Tough is another brand built on a USA made ethos. The

Darn Tough label, from Cabot Mill, traditionally a private label producer, initially attracted a cult following based on the brand's messaging of socks being made by "darn tough Vermonters."

At the end the day, however, socks must fit, feel good, function properly and rely on innovative product development. DeFeet, for example, has recently introduced a new reflective yarn. "We are on the frontier of a new age of domestic sock manufacturing," says DeFeet owner Shane Cooper, whose father sold knitting machines and parts. "I saw the exodus and jobs lost, and watched as parents in the hosiery business lost employment and advised their kids not to go into manufacturing. But this is a new generation of hosiery. I've seen the resurgence." —Emily Walzer

TALL TREKKER FUSION COMPRESSION FIT

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MOISTURE REPELLING LINER
ABSORBENT OUTER LAYER

A Meaningful Niche

By Lou Dzierzak

After spending a decade as a mental health counselor, Chris Gerston needed a change. Pondering career alternatives with his wife Erica and friends, Gerston decided to open an outdoor specialty shop specializing in backcountry skiing and climbing.

“I was burned out. My wife was pregnant and didn’t see a future with her job,” says Gerston, now the owner of Backcountry Essentials, an outdoor store in Bellingham, WA. “After talking with friends about the business opportunity and retail lifestyle, we said, ‘Let’s give it a go’.

Backcountry Essentials offers a mix of new and used gear and has earned a reputation in Bellingham for expertise in technical backcountry skiing, climbing and backpacking. Gerston buys used gear from local customers and adds manufacturer’s closeouts and samples. “Used gear attracts a steady stream of people through the door,” says Gerston. “Used gear has been a very consistent business for us. We buy outright from people and don’t use a commission approach.”

Located in the Pacific Northwest, the store has a customer base where “everyone looks like they could turn around at any given point in their day and start an outdoor adventure,” says Gerston. “We see the main growth of recreation in bouldering (climbing shoes), backcountry skiing (AT or Alpine boots with a walk mode and tech and frame AT bindings), light and durable and quick backpacking and car camping trips, and outdoor lifestyle as a fashion statement.”

As the operator of a single specialty shop, Gerston has fine-tuned a niche strategy in order to battle his larger competitors in the retail world. “We have an REI in town. They offer everything. We are 3,000 square feet and they are at least 15,000. Our niche in town is to be seen as a more technical store. We

spend a lot of time training our staff. We don’t use part time or seasonal staff. We want people to stick around as long as possible,” notes Gerston.

As several other small retailers in his vicinity have closed or reduced their product lines, Gerston stepped in. “Two of our biggest competitors on the ski side got out of the business,” he explains. “We had this opportunity to be the a niche backcountry ski shop. We have expanded our product selection to become a full service ski shop offering cross-country ski,

Used gear has been a very consistent business for us. We buy outright from people and don’t use a commission approach.

alpine and backcountry gear and equipment. We want to focus on what we can be the best at. We’ve taken a very strategic approach to serving the ski enthusiasts in this area.”

To accomplish that objective, Gerston hired experience full time staff, purchased ski machines to service skis and brought in new boot fitting technologies to provide faster more technical boot fitting. “We’ve groomed a reputation to be technically and community minded. How can we compete with a big box store that has five-times our square footage and carries so many jackets in so many colors? We knew we would be competing with much larger stores. Our product selection was going to be finely-tuned and essential.”

Rental and demo ski services also differentiate Backcountry Essentials. Gerston expanded the demo and rental product line to include skis for kids. While offering season rental packages for kids, Backcountry Essentials takes a different approach for adult rentals. “We’ve maintained our high end status and invested in quality demo skis with the idea that demos will help us sell our inline skis,” notes Gerston.

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Store: Backcountry Essentials Location: Bellingham, WA

Backcountry Essentials' season pass allows customers to try a variety of different boots, skis and bindings over the course of a season. "Demos are a great way to show people new equipment. After the demo experience they are walking out the door with their own equipment," says Gerston.

Located in an area filled with outdoor enthusiasts, Backcountry Essentials' customer base is diverse. "Our customers are outdoorsy. We see everything from a mom who is looking for something to stay warm and dry on the soccer field to people who are going to ski or a bouldering gym," says Gerston. "We don't divide customers by age. There's a huge range. We see high schoolers looking for climbing shoes, college students who want to try backpacking and retired people are getting out themselves or buying equipment for their families. Overall, there's a bell curve from 18-to-65. By far our largest customer group is the 35-to-40 year old.

Backcountry Essential's marketing and advertising campaigns acknowledges that generational spread. "Although I'd like to say that we are that sophisticated both in our buying and marketing, I think an outside observer would say we look to have presented ourselves more as local, knowledgeable, friendly experts to all the generations rather than by targeting different generations," he says. "We do target our buys for different age customers to some degree with certain brands and products but not so much by the labels of the generation, but older people seem to be more conservative in colors, for example, than younger consumers. With marketing we do try to think about the right message via the right media to a certain population, but our messages always has the backbone of presenting our expertise, or else some sort of hedonistic enjoyment of the outdoor lifestyle."

Gerston used a mix of social media tools and direct marketing to maintain relationships with current customers as well

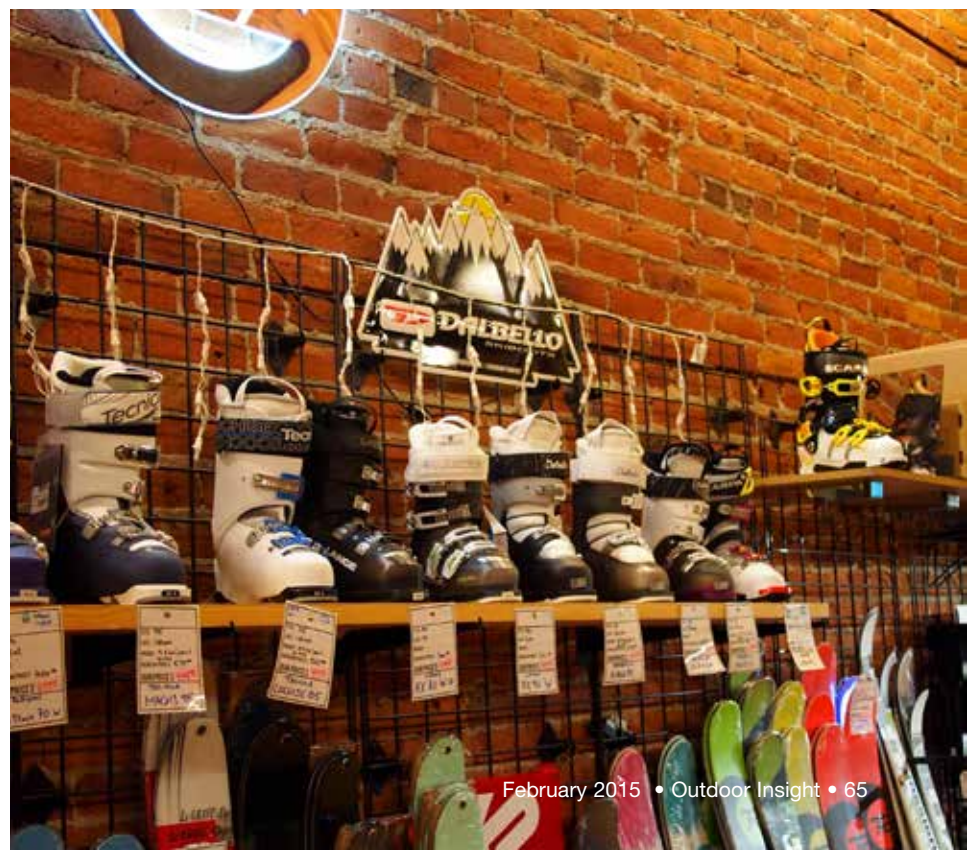
as introduce the store to new audiences. "Social media has been more of a factor in our marketing strategy over the past several years than more traditional forms of marketing. Social media is what helps us inform customers about events and keep them thinking that we're cool," says Gerston. "As we seek new customers, we are currently increasing our traditional marketing avenues with direct mail, the local weekly, and local radio to supplement our social media.

We kicked our paddling business off by bringing in beer. Beer continues to be part of our persona and is another niche part of our store.

Backcountry Essentials distributes a catalog that includes a ski atlas for local backcountry and ski areas. "The catalog is relevant to both our inbound and touring customers and potential customers," notes Gerston. "We have had older competitors close up shop so we are hoping to reroute some shopping patterns as people search for where they want to go next. I think most people still prefer brick and mortar, but push come to shove some are price driven unless they recognize that some things like ski boots and climbing shoes still need to be explored in a store."

While establishing a strong reputation for winter season expertise, Backcountry Essentials shifts gears to offer the similar level of service to climbers, backpackers and paddlers.

And when Backcountry Essentials added paddling to the store's product mix, got creative in order to attract attention. Installing a cooler with a wide variety of local craft beers did the trick. "We kicked our paddling business off by bringing in beer," says Gerston. "People seem to appreciate the selection. Beer continues to be part of our persona and is another niche part of our store." ●



#Say What?

Retailers Tell Us What They Think of Social Media Marketing.



We checked in with several outdoor retailers across the country to ask how social media has influenced the way they market to consumers. Here's what they had to say.

Brent Troncalli, owner, Outside World, Dawsonville, GA

"Social media works for a small percentage of people. For social media that audience wants to participate. They want to be part of your family. They may be a valued customer since they may be in your store more often. It's harder now to reach people farther away than you could in the past. A newspaper ad could reach everyone in my community. Now, very few people are reading newspapers. We've been trying to think about how to reach people who aren't our core customers."

Kevin Rosenberg, owner, Gear to Go Outfitters, Brooklyn, NY

"We use Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. It definitely helps but none of that is free anymore. If you don't spend money on Facebook ads, no one will ever see your posts. We have over 2,000 followers on Facebook and if we just posted something maybe 70 people will see it, but if we spend some money, thousands of people will see it. For all the people who signed up to see our posts, they won't see them unless we are paying Facebook."

You have to be active on social and have a presence. That shows you are up to date and paying attention but I don't think those tools are as effective as people think it is without spending money on it."

Phil Leeds, owner, Skinny Skis, Jackson, WY

"Social media has provided us the opportunity to communicate our messages quickly, accurately and relatively inexpensively."

Mike Massey, owner, Massey's Outfitters, New Orleans, LA

"When we use social media we target the digital demographic, people that get most of their information from online platforms. We focus on the local area and research what people are looking for. That type of marketing is extremely sophisticated and cost effective. Social media is much more powerful than running print ads."

Darren Bush, owner, Rutabaga Paddlesports, Madison, WI

"Social media is not as effective as people think it is. Especially with Facebook, they have ramped it up if you want to post you have to pay. We used Google words when that process was cheap. Now that's changed. I try to use the web to communicate with my customers and use that as an extension of the store. If people find us on search engines that's fine."

David Gracie, owner, Wild River Outfitters, Virginia Beach, VA

"Social media allows us to respond to trends in the industry more quickly as well as let our customers know what is going on in our store. We try to foster a sense of local community for our customers and letting them know what we have going on

through social media further bolsters our position as a responsive local presence. The trick for us is making it genuine. Along with callouts for sales and products we like to make sure we share some of our personal reality as well. Our most engaging content usually comes from a dog photo or a staff outing photo album."

Chris Gerston, owner, Backcountry Essentials, Bellingham WA

"Social media has been more of a factor in our marketing strategy over the past several years than more traditional forms of marketing. Maybe that was because we were a startup (eight years now) and it seemed to produce steady feedback that our message was being heard. As we seek new customers, we are currently increasing our traditional marketing avenues with direct mail, the local weekly, and local radio to supplement our social media. And the social media is what helps us inform customers about events and keep them thinking that we're cool."

Chris Groom, CEO, Mountain High Outfitters, Birmingham, AL

"Social media is a compliment to retail today, but also a very time consuming piece to the overall puzzle. Social media has allowed us to offer instant specials to our customers that follow us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc. It also allows us to communicate on a more intimate level with customers, showing them what we are all about as a company, involved in throughout the day, and even allows us to connect with them and experience their adventures as they have their own experiences."

Joe Butler, president of Black Creek Outfitters, Jacksonville, FL

"Social media is the primary place I spend my money. People are connected with you and social media offers a way to strengthen that connection. The opportunity to connect and respond to consumers gives you an advantage if you are monitoring what's happening."